

DEMOCRACY DIALOGUE



Technical Notes From USAID's Global Center for Democracy and Governance ♦ December 1999

USAID's Role

Since it began its support of political party development in Hungary in 1989, the U.S. Agency for International Development has supported the development of democratic political parties in more than 50 countries through country-specific programming as well as through regional political party training and assistance programs.

While political party assistance in the Latin America/Caribbean and Asia/Near East regions has been comparatively limited, USAID support for political party development in Africa and Europe/Eurasia has encompassed a wide variety of countries in different stages of political transition.

Limits of Party Assistance

Currently, political party development work undertaken by USAID and its grantees is shaped by statutory language found in the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, several broad Agency policy guidelines relating to democracy and governance assistance, and guidance provided by USAID's Center for Democracy and Governance and its Elections and Political Processes Team.

Further explanation is also available in the Center's *USAID Political Party Development Assistance* (ordering info. on p. 8).

Political Party Development Assistance and USAID

Ronald C. Shaiko, U.S. Agency for International Development

For more than a decade, USAID has supported the development of viable democratic multi-party systems in more than 50 newly democratizing countries around the world. While such programming accounts for less than five percent of USAID's annual democracy and governance (DG) spending, the work in this area is vital in sustaining democratic governments and societies. Competing political parties are essential elements in the establishment and maintenance of democracies. No other institutions in democratic societies have collective responsibilities for undertaking **all** of the following roles: expression and choice; electoral competition and political dialogue; aggregation and articulation of societal interests; political socialization; and leadership selection and governance. While some organizations and institutions in civil society may perform one or more of these roles, only political parties have the collective responsibility for representing and governing democratic societies. Interest groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and even the media may serve as important challenging entities that check the powers of government, but only competitive, democratic political parties and their elected and appointed representatives can govern and provide "loyal opposition" within the governing institutions of democratic societies.

DG support targeted at the development of competitive, multi-party systems worldwide faces several limitations. First, the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 imposes a legal constraint on development assistance funds. Section 116(e) of the act concludes with a caveat: "None of these funds may be used, directly or indirectly, to influence the outcome of any election in any country." The Center for Democracy and Governance has interpreted Section 116(e) broadly to include all U.S. government support to political parties, regardless of the funding source. As a result, while assistance to indigenous NGOs, for example, may take the form of direct financial support, no such direct or indirect (in-kind) financial assistance is supported by the Center through its funding mechanisms.

Second, political party development assistance is the most overtly political type of DG programming to be undertaken. A strict interpretation of the Section 116(e) language would result in a ban on any activities related to political parties. While such an interpretation is not applied, there remains some reticence in USAID missions and embassies to engage in political party work. In order to assist missions in navigating the politically charged environment surrounding political party development assistance, the Center published guidance to address concerns relating to political party programming. [See *USAID Political Party Development Assistance* (Washington, DC: USAID/Center for Democracy and Governance, Technical Publication Series, PN-ACE-500, (April 1999), 47 pp.]

Third, in many newly democratizing countries of the world, the legacy of political parties is not terribly positive. In Central and Eastern Europe and the republics of the former

continued on p. 5

IRI/Slovakia

IRI's early program in Slovakia focused on local government, with an emphasis on coalition-building among local parties. IRI also worked with Slovak youth organizations to help youth political activists to play a larger role in politics.

In late 1997, IRI began to help prepare political parties, candidates, and youth political organizations for the September 1998 parliamentary elections. At the heart of IRI's political communication training program was a series of public opinion polls conducted in the year leading up to the parliamentary elections. The opinion polling program succeeded in changing the nature of the campaign debate by encouraging parties to focus on the voters' priorities.

IRI's opinion polling projects had a second critical goal: To help Slovakia's divided democrats build an electoral coalition. IRI polls and training were also instrumental in the SDK's adoption of a "Contract with Slovakia."

IRI's Priorities for Party Building

by Lorne W. Craner, International Republican Institute

The International Republican Institute (IRI) has conducted political party building programs in developing democracies since 1984. IRI's approach to party building has several facets, whose combined objective is to help build parties around solid, broad-based organizational structures and politically responsive programs.

Strong Grassroots Organizations

IRI emphasizes the importance of building strong grassroots political organizations as the foundation for stable and consistently competitive national parties. This means building local party branches, empowering local party leaders, expanding membership, and developing local constituency service programs that often require effective volunteer recruitment. It also means helping parties develop reliable and effective channels of communication between local and national party structures in an effort to stymie the tendency to revert to habits of the past in which national parties dictate to regional and local parties on all matters.

Responsive Party Platforms and Campaign Themes

IRI also emphasizes the development of party platforms and campaign themes that are based on input from local and national constituency groups. Although lack of input is becoming less common, political parties in many developing democracies where IRI works frequently paid little attention to the priority concerns of average citizens. These concerns tended to center around "nuts and bolts" social and economic issues such as affordable housing, crime, and unemployment. At the local level, IRI training stresses direct constituency contact through door-to-door programs, town meetings, and office hours for local elected officials and members of parliament as the means of getting parties and elected officials in better touch with voter sentiment. Priority is also placed on helping parties develop systematic programs to reach women and youth, and to bring them more directly into the political process. At the regional and national levels, IRI has impressed upon parties the importance of developing a better understanding of the uses of public opinion research. Where parties have paid more attention to what voters care about, the results have been dramatic. Slovakia and Macedonia, where opposition parties' coalitions recently won national elections due to campaigns that reflected public priorities, are two cases in point.

Political Communication Skills

IRI dedicates substantial effort to helping parties improve their political communication skills. Training programs consistent with this aim teach parties how to develop professional relationships with the press at local and national levels, how to make the most effective use of the oftentimes limited resources available for radio and TV, and how to circumvent the electronic media and reach potential voters by other means when media is state-owned and politically hostile.

IRI party building programs have provided training in modern campaign techniques and get-out-the-vote (GOTV) programs. IRI campaign training emphasizes the use of opinion polls and focus groups to hone the content of political themes and messages and effectively target those themes and messages during campaigns. IRI has also used polls as a means of helping and encouraging parties to make the strategically critical decisions involved in the formation of successful electoral coalitions, as was the case in Bulgaria, Poland, and most recently Slovakia.

continued on p. 7

NDI: Challenges to Political Parties

by Ivan Doherty, National Democratic Institute

A growing disparity between civil society and political institutions has begun to create a serious political vacuum in a number of countries. There is a distinct danger in an approach to development that strengthens civic organizations, which represent the “demand side” of the political equation, without providing commensurate assistance to those political organizations that must aggregate the interests of civil society groups and respond to their demands. Without strong political parties and political institutions that are accountable and effective, the door is open to those populist leaders who will ignore the institutions of government, especially any system of checks and balances, and respect for the rule of law.

Importance of Political Parties

In situations where political parties do not play a constructive role in parliament or where there is a lack of mutual respect or consensus, democratic development is placed in serious jeopardy. The failure of reformers to build strong political parties has clearly slowed the democratic transition in Russia. Political parties in Venezuela and Peru have demonstrated an inability or unwillingness to modernize and become more in touch with citizens, and their very existence is now threatened. The current political stalemate in Bangladesh, where both the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party and governing Awami League have taken up diverse entrenched positions, is leading to continued political unrest and threats to political stability. The recent coup in Pakistan clearly shows one tragic result of a failure to tackle political party obstructionism and corruption.

Examples abound, however, of political parties rising to the challenge and playing a constructive role in a changing political environment. The gradual movement toward democratic norms in Morocco since the 1996 constitutional changes is a case in point. Political parties that were considered to be “anti-establishment” for almost 50 years accepted an invitation to form a government following the 1998 general election. In cooperation with other parties, they have gradually maintained the momentum of reform. In such countries as Slovakia and Paraguay, parties from across the political spectrum are attempting to put aside political differences in the interest of their country to address political and economic problems.

Crisis of Confidence

A crisis of confidence in political parties now exists, both in established democracies and in nascent multi-party systems. Globally, citizens have grown increasingly frustrated with their political parties and leaders. Polls, focus groups, and voting behavior indicate that society largely views political parties as ineffective, corrupt, and out of touch with their needs. Young people are hesitating to join or to become associated with political parties. At the same time, support has risen for independent candidates, special interest parties, and anti-party movements. Political parties have been forced to address these weaknesses and the lack of credibility in a variety of ways. These include placing greater emphasis on issues of ethics in public office, modernizing party structures to allow for greater citizen participation, and allowing greater openness and transparency in the operation of government and political systems generally.

continued on p. 6

NDI's Leadership Program

Since the inaugural seminar of NDI's Political Leadership Program last February, participants from 15 political parties in Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay, and Venezuela have been drawing on their new skills and on NDI's international network of volunteer political practitioners to implement their own party strengthening projects. Program participants have launched a variety of initiatives—from enhancing indigenous political participation in Guatemala and promoting youth participation in political parties in Mexico, to building the training capacity of local branches of political parties in Paraguay and Venezuela. The effects of these initiatives are reaching a broad audience among the membership of the participants' parties. In this way, the program is helping to build consensus about potential initiatives to strengthen political parties in the hemisphere.

While genuine party reform is a long-term effort, evidence of modest progress is already emerging. Through an active alumni e-mail network, participants are communicating with each other about their projects and soliciting advice on party building strategies. They are also introducing strategies learned at the seminar to home-country colleagues.

IFES' Areas of Expertise

IFES has offered a number of assistance and training programs that have benefitted political party development around the world:

Party Law Development

Party law development includes both technical assessments and on-site assistance to parliaments and parties to develop and strengthen laws that contribute to the development of parties and a "level playing field."

Media Access and Training

Media access and training assist political parties with developing media strategies and communication skills.

Governance Training

This post-elections training assists successful candidates and parties in their role in the legislative process and their responsibilities to the electorate.

Pollwatcher Training

Pollwatcher training assists party organizers in the recruitment, training, and deployment of pollwatchers.

Gender and Minority Programs

These programs assist party organizers to strengthen their contacts with diverse constituencies.

IFES and Political Party Strengthening

Analyzing Laws to Create a Better Enabling Environment

by Pamela Reeves, International Foundation for Election Systems

The International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) provides assistance in strengthening political systems that serves to facilitate political party development. IFES' extensive work in analyzing constitutional, electoral, and political party laws, followed by recommendations for changes, creates a better enabling environment for party development both within the legislature and within the context of a campaign. For example, as official legal counsel to the Supreme Rada of Ukraine, IFES consulted with the Ukrainian parliament on efforts to improve its professionalism and quality of legislative drafting. The Ukrainian parliament-IFES official agreement also provided for assistance in the development of new parliamentary, presidential, and local election laws of Ukraine; a law on political parties; and legislation regarding judicial restructuring and independence. In addition, in Bosnia, Mali, Mozambique, and other countries, IFES provided training materials to political party pollwatchers and provided detailed legal analysis as required to party trainees.

Client Groups

IFES' client groups include civil society organizations, election authorities, and other actors in elections and political processes at both national and local levels. Due to IFES' strong official ties with election officials, members of government, and key parliamentarians, IFES is positioned as an "honest broker" in dozens of countries around the world and often serves as the sole catalyst for bringing political parties and election commissions to a common understanding on the "rules of the game." From this vantage point, IFES has had great success in strengthening party legislation and lobbying to give parties a seat at the table of governance. A recent example of IFES' direct assistance is in Qatar, which held its first-ever election in March 1999. IFES worked with an organization of Qatari women to encourage women's participation in the election as voters and as candidates. IFES conducted a groundbreaking training program for women candidates, their campaign staff, and other interested women. The program included an Arabic-language guide to running for office as a woman. The IFES project—or more specifically, the corps of women IFES trained—is now serving as a catalyst for expanded women's political participation in other Gulf countries.

National Surveys and Focus Group Research

IFES' national surveys and focus group research are also effective tools in political party development. IFES has found that through its surveys, conducted in 11 countries, political parties are able to identify issues of importance to voters, to identify constituencies to whom they can tailor their message, and to determine popular media sources in-country through which to transmit messages. In addition, survey findings are of use to parties in determining strategy (e.g., whether to practice issue politics or personality politics during campaigning) as much as they are to USAID and implementing partners in designing programs and other interventions aimed at party development. □

continued from p. 1

Soviet Union, many citizens equate political parties with communism and, hence, are apprehensive about joining them. In Latin America, while parties are more developed, public perceptions of political parties and their leaders are not positive as these institutions are viewed as corrupt and as remnants of past regimes. In many African nations, political parties, linked to tribal loyalties, have been the main sources of violence and political unrest. Throughout Asia, political parties are generally weak and ineffective.

Supporting a Wide Variety of Programs

Despite these constraints, USAID has supported a wide variety of political party development assistance programs through its two main implementing partners—the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI)—as well as through the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES). NDI and IRI, created through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), receive the bulk of their funding for political party assistance from USAID, but do receive limited funds from NED to conduct political party programs, usually in countries in which USAID does not operate. Political party activities conducted by the implementing partners primarily have an organizational focus, including strategic planning, organizational development, local/regional party organization, resource development, membership recruitment, fundraising, and media relations. A secondary focus of many programs is on the electoral aspects of political parties. Such programming includes communications strategies, voter participation, campaign planning, candidate recruitment, grassroots outreach, and programs targeted at mobilizing women and youth. The tertiary level of political party assistance is governance and the political process. Party activities in this area include legislative party building, electoral law reform, coalition building, and party pollwatcher training.

Lessons Learned

From the work of IRI and NDI in the area of political party development assistance, we are able to draw a number of conclusions relating to the formulation and implementation of party programming. First, party assistance programs must factor in the fundamental political, institutional, socioeconomic, and cultural conditions that exist in the country. Second, for party programs to succeed, they must address the needs of political parties, as determined by the party leaders themselves, and also encourage party leaders to look beyond traditional approaches or short-term needs. Third, party development programs have had the greatest impact in situations where there have been major or partial political openings that allow new parties to emerge and face the challenge of contesting elections. Fourth, the majority of party programs have focused on helping parties mount successful election campaigns. Fifth, working with parties on regional and local levels has proven to be the key to long-term party development. Sixth, modern, high technology campaign techniques have limited application in newly democratizing countries. Seventh, trust among technical experts and trainers, and the party representatives to be trained is essential and takes time to develop. And eighth, in limited situations, the most effective way of reforming party systems may be to support the development of civil society and labor groups in the absence of viable competitors to established parties.

Guidance

From these conclusions, we offer the following guidance in the development and implementation of political party development assistance. First, be as

IDEA and Party Work

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) has undertaken initiatives and projects that assist political parties:

1. Produced, along with the United Nations and IFES, an on-line global information resource on the cost and administration of elections. Through a CD-ROM and website, www.aceproject.org, election administrators around the world can access some 5,000 pages of information on the function, process, and cost alternatives in election administration. The Administration and Cost of Election Project (the ACE project) provides complete and systematic information on the range of choices available for those involved in organizing elections. It has a section on parties and candidates that includes campaign regulations, registration, financing, thresholds, limits, and codes of conduct.

2. Published *Code of Conduct for Political Parties Campaigning in Democratic Elections*. The code provides norms of behavior for incumbent political parties and has various other provisions to help create a level playing field for all political actors involved.

3. Began developing a new handbook on the funding of political parties

4. Scheduled a conference on parties in Botswana, February 2000

continued on p. 7

continued from p. 3

Parties have adapted slowly to change in the new modern communication age. In an era when presentation and style often count more than substance, political leaders grapple with the dilemma of “soundbite” policies versus a more substantive public policy pronouncement, thus contributing to the electorate’s cynicism. Another emerging trend in recent years is the willingness of political parties from opposite ends of the political spectrum to coalesce to defeat a stronger, often autocratic political force, without giving due consideration to conflicting political ideologies or policy positions. Once the initial euphoria abates and the policy issues move to center stage, political paralysis can give rise to citizen dissatisfaction and a further undermining of the political process as a whole. In Romania and Slovakia, Parties in Parliament programs, developed by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) have been effective by promoting communication between parties and partnerships with civil society groups.

Challenges

While traditional political party development assistance remains viable in many countries, the challenges facing political parties often require NDI to develop innovative approaches to conducting its programs.

One example is in Latin America, which has a long history of strong, well-organized political parties, many of which played key roles in the wave of democracy that swept the hemisphere in the 1980s and early 1990s. Unfortunately, the same political parties that had been successful in the fight against the region’s dictators are now viewed, in many places, as ineffective, corrupt, and out of touch with their constituencies. This situation has led to widespread public disenchantment with political parties throughout the hemisphere as evidenced by young and minority voters who are frustrated by “closed” political parties and are increasingly supporting independent candidates and anti-party movements.

In response to this “crisis of confidence” in parties and their leadership, NDI and the then-Ministry of the Presidency of Chile brought together 45 senior political party leaders from 14 countries to discuss common challenges facing parties and to recommend initiatives for party reform and renewal. Party leaders who participated in the August 1995 meeting called for

- New leadership and ideas for political parties throughout the hemisphere
- More young people in political parties and leadership opportunities for them
- Internal democratization of political parties
- An exchange of training resources and ideas about party renewal among political parties in the region

Based on these recommendations, as well as on subsequent requests from political party leaders, NDI developed two complementary initiatives—funded by USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy—to help strengthen political parties throughout the hemisphere.

The first is the *Political Party Network*, a program that seeks to foster an exchange of experiences among political parties by providing them with access to a clearinghouse of relevant resource materials and other documents NDI has collected since 1984. The second is a long-term regional initiative—the *Political Leadership Program* (see sidebar p. 3)—to train young political leaders, strengthen political parties, and help foster relations among parties in the hemisphere. The program comprises a leadership development seminar, party-strengthening projects, and in-country training workshops. □

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continued from p. 5

inclusive as possible when planning political party training activities. All parties committed to pursuing democratic agendas and practices warrant assistance. Second, in order to avoid interfering in the domestic affairs of sovereign states, USAID Missions and their implementing partners must be clear regarding the criteria used to select political parties to participate in program activities and must adhere to the domestic laws and regulations relating to assistance to political parties. Third, in order to avoid directly or indirectly influencing the outcome of elections, political party assistance programs should be executed in an inclusive and equitable manner, and should not include direct financial or in-kind support to individual political parties. Finally, the timing of party assistance activities may raise concerns of undue influence on the electoral process. In order to avoid such conflicts, political party assistance programs should cease operations one month prior to pending elections; the only exception is assistance and training for party pollwatchers. As this activity is not related to the campaigns of individual parties, it may continue up until election day.

It is our hope that political party development assistance will become an increasingly important aspect of DG programming as newly-democratizing countries move beyond the initial steps of democratization and on to the more difficult tasks of democratic governance. Only through competitive political parties and processes can a democratic society sustain itself. □

continued from p. 2

Teaching parties how to identify and recruit potentially successful candidates—up to and including the adoption of party primaries and caucuses, as was the case in Bulgaria and Georgia, respectively—has been another priority in IRI campaign training. Helping parties get voters to the polls on election day by means of local and national GOTV efforts is another important component of IRI campaign training in developing democracies, where voter apathy, especially among youth, has unfortunately been on the rise.

Importance of Assessment

Critical to the successful design of a country-specific party building program is an accurate assessment of what level of development potential program partners have already achieved, and what kind of political environment they confront. All new IRI programs therefore begin with a country assessment designed to answer questions that include: How are parties currently organized? What are their messages and on what basis have they chosen them? Do they have rules and platforms? What is the state of their grassroots organizations? Have they attempted to field candidates and compete in campaigns? What are the laws governing the organization and activities of political parties? Are elections on the horizon?

A thorough assessment that includes significant input from the political leaders and activists at both the national and regional levels helps IRI determine which facets of its overall party building approach are most needed and most likely to be effective in a specific situation. For example, following an assessment in early 1997 in Georgia and Azerbaijan, democratic political parties were found to be somewhat more sophisticated than those of the other former Soviet republics at the national level, but they clearly lacked strong grassroots organizations. IRI's current program in the Caucasus thus emphasizes grassroots party development. In Croatia, on the other hand, while IRI's assessment found that parties were also generally weak at the grassroots level, an approaching election cycle and a fragmented democratic opposition were deemed to be more immediate priorities. IRI's response in this case was a program that focused efforts on communications and coalition building at the national party level. □

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